



Munira H. Mutran. *A Cor e a Forma da Literatura Russa na Irlanda: Refrações*. São Paulo: FFLCH/USP/CNPq, 2020, pp. 389. ISBN: 978-658762140-1

Munira H. Mutran's book *A Cor e a Forma da Literatura Russa na Irlanda: Refrações* [*The Colour and Form of Russian Literature in Ireland: Refractions*] appeared in 2020. This highly innovative study concentrates on unexpected intertextual links between Russian and Irish prose and theatre. The book, written in a clear and accessible style, is of relevance for students and scholars of Irish and Slavonic Studies but also addressed to the general reader interested in the interconnections of the literary output of the two cultural spheres. The book falls into three main parts, entitled “A Presença do Conto Russo na Irlanda” [“The presence of the Russian Short Story in Ireland”], “Romances Russos no Palco Irlandês” [The Russian novel on the Irish stage] and “Do Teatro Para o Teatro [From Theatre to Theatre”] and it terminates on reflections on the different ways in which Anton Chekov and his work receive “a new life” in the plays of Brian Friel and Marina Carr, for example.

The study opens with an illuminating foreword written by the Russian scholar Elena Vássina, setting the book into its historical and geographical context. With great literary sensitivity, Mutran draws the reader into two very different literary universes, which at first glance seem historically, culturally and geographically entirely remote from each other. She artfully shows how these contrasting worlds interrelate and communicate with each other. The author explains her choice of title by arguing that the term “refraction” refers to the deviation that rays of light, heat or sound undergo when passing from one medium to another. In this way, she refers to the different types of deviations and trajectories texts undergo when they move from one place to another. Before starting the analysis of her corpus, Mutran engages in a thorough discussion on the notion of “intertextuality”, referring to key critical texts written by Julia Kristeva, Laurent Jenny, Michael Rifaterre, Harold Bloom, Julie Sanders and others. In Mutran's book, intertextuality can be understood as a meeting of different “voices” and semantic positions, in the sense of a dialogue in which not only authors but also readers participate. Throughout her study, she convincingly shows how classical Russian literature becomes one of the main axes in the Irish literary universe, entering it by means of various intertextual methods: allusions, reminiscences, quotations, adaptations, and versions.

The centre of the book forms the intertextual analysis of famous works by Russian masters of the nineteenth century. Among them count *The Overcoat* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol,

Fathers and Sons (1862) and *A Month in the Country* (1872) by Ivan Turgenev, *The Golovlyov Family* (1880) by Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Anna Karenina* (1877) and *The Power of Darkness* (1886) by Leo Tolstoy, “The Lady with the Little Dog” (1899) as well as Chekhov’s main theatre plays. The literary works analysed by Mutran in her book cover more than two centuries, ranging from the dialogue which Ivan Turgenev initiated as early as 1903 by George Moore in his short story collection *The Untilled Field* to a new adaptation of Chekhov’s play *Uncle Vania* staged by the well-known Irish playwright Conor McPherson in 2020. In her comprehensive study, Mutran dedicates herself not only to the close reading of a vast selection of novels, short stories and plays, but she also provides important information about their political, historical and cultural background to make them accessible to a readership which might not necessarily be familiar with both cultural spheres.

The first part of the volume focuses on the emergence of the modern Irish short story and its debts to Chekhov, Turgenev and Gogol. At the beginning of the chapter Mutran analyses the influence of Turgenev’s short story collection *A Sportsman’s Sketches* on Georges Moore’s collection *The Untilled Field*, in which Russian scenery becomes transplanted to the outskirts of Dublin. In this context, she extensively explores the different narrative elements, which the Irish short story writer integrates into his short stories. Subsequently, she concentrates on Sean O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor and skilfully demonstrates how a particular Chekhovian kind of humour shines through their prose. Mutran observes that the two Irish writers saw in the work of the Russian authors a number of similarities with Irish reality, such as the presence of isolated houses, monotonous towns, indecisive men and women as well as the impossibility of any social or political change. She further draws attention to Brian Friel’s short play entitled the *Yalta Game* (2001), which is inspired by Chekhov’s famous short story “The Lady with the Little Dog”. Mutran suggests that Friel must have been impressed by Chekhov’s poetic use of language and inspired by the unfathomable mystery of human suffering, a reoccurring theme in the Russian author’s work.

In the second part of her book, Mutran discusses a number of Russian novels, which have served as sources of inspiration for Irish writers. The best-known example is O’Faolain’s *A Nest of Simple Folk* (1933), which is based on Turgenev’s novel *A Nest of Gentle Folk* (1858). Mutran carefully explains how O’Faolain explores the themes of religion, poverty and the relationship between peasants and landowners in nineteenth century Ireland through the lens of tsarist Russia. Concentrating on a further Russian writer, she points out how *The Golovlyov Family* (1889) by Saltykov-Shchedrin has served as a basis for Thomas Murphy’s play *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant* (2009). Particularly interesting are Mutran’s contemplations about

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (2007) which is based on Leo Tolstoy's masterpiece *Anna Karenina* (1899). Demonstrating a number of parallels between the characters of the two novels, Mutran convincingly shows the different ways in which a literary work set in nineteenth century St. Petersburg becomes transposed into Celtic Tiger Dublin.

The third part of the volume begins with critical reflections on Brian Friel's adaptation of Turgenev's play *A Month in the Country* (1855) and John McGahern's rewriting of Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* (1886). M. Mutran points out Friel's special interest in Chekhov's plays, noting that the Irish dramatist produced his own adaptations of *The Three Sisters* (1901) and *Uncle Vania* (1898). She explains that Friel decided to create his own version of Chekhov's plays as the Irish dramatist was dissatisfied with the British English used in earlier translation. In order to reach a specifically Irish audience, he decided to write his adaptation in Hiberno English, the variation of the English language spoken in Ireland. At the end of her book, Mutran illustrates how two Chekhovian characters receive "a new life" in Friel's one-act play *Afterplay* (2002), an original and provocative sequel to two of Chekhov's dramas – *Uncle Vania* and *Three Sisters*. The Irish playwright imagines a possible meeting of Sonia (*Uncle Vania*) with Andrei (*Three Sisters*) in a seedy café near the railway station in Soviet Moscow in the early 1920s. Both characters meet twenty years after their last appearance in Chekhov's plays. Only over a glass of vodka, but not without a specific kind of dark Chekhovian humour, they are able to share their miserable lives with each other. Mutran informs her readers that *Afterplay* is the result of the long process of reworking *The Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vania*. She argues that the affinities between the Russian and the Irish writer were so intense that, by resuscitating the two characters, Friel – in a metaphysical sense – manages to make Chekhov his co-author. In the final pages of her book, Mutran opens up new perspectives on the key figure of Russian theatre. She draws attention to Marina Carr's play *16 Possible Glimpses* (2011) in which Chekhov appears as the fictional protagonist. Mutran considers Carr's play as homage to an exceptional writer. Through her discussion of Friel's and Carr's recent plays, she highlights the enduring interest Irish authors show in the work and life of Russian masters.

In her study, Mutran does not only show a profound knowledge of Irish and Russian literature, she also refers to French authors such as Maupassant and Flaubert to set the works analysed into a global context. Through the impressive amount of well-presented material, she makes her readers curious to discover the Irish and Russian originals themselves. As a very valuable contribution to the field of Irish and Slavonic Studies, it can only be hoped that the book will be translated into English and Russian to make it accessible to a broad readership.

Stephanie Schwerter